

Public Worship

Would The Valid Circumstances Of Public Worship Please Step Forward The second commandment requires the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God has appointed in his Word ... and forbids the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his Word. [1] What is not ordained of God in His Word is forbidden. That, in a nut-shell is the Biblical and Reformed principle of worship. It delivered the Reformation Churches from Roman idolatry and superstition. It is very precious to us as heirs of the Reformation. It a doctrine that deserves very carefully thought by every truly Reformed believer in an age in which man-centred innovations inundate the churches and defile the pure worship of God.Â

Because many, if not all, of the innovations in God's worship are introduced under the guise of things indifferent, or, circumstances of worship it is most necessary for the church - and by church we mean both the office-bearers and members - to be able clearly to distinguish valid circumstances from invalid innovations. Hence the question: "Would the valid circumstances of worship please step forward?" Necessary Distinctions

When we come to apply the regulative principle of worship to the many things that could conceivably be appended to God's worship, it becomes immediately evident that a distinction exists, and must be recognised, between the act of worship ordained by God and the several practical / organisational matters that surround that act. To illustrate this point, consider for example praise in song. If we are to praise God in song there must needs be some practical arrangements put in place before we can proceed. We can hardly sing together without a tune, pitch, tempo etc. Praise in song (the inspired Psalms) has its place in worship by Divine command (Ps. 149:1, Col. 3:16 etc), but concerning the tune, pitch, tempo, etc. the Word of God is silent. We don't find any specific Divine command concerning these things. Evidently, a distinction exists here - in the very nature of the case. The distinction is between the God ordained act of worship on one hand, and those circumstances that are accidental to it, on the other hand.

This distinction has been expressed in terms of element and circumstance; praise in song being one element, and tune, pitch etc being the circumstances. It has been suggested that it may be more accurate and helpful to speak of essence and accident as this would make it clear that the distinction is between that which constitutes the act of worship itself, and those things that are purely incidental or supplementary circumstances to that act. This is indeed exactly the distinction that exists. We have no objection to those terms, however we will use the terms element/s and circumstance/s; mainly because they have long been used by our Presbyterian fathers, and members of the EPC are familiar with them.

From what has already been said, it appears that there are certain things which are in sacra (elements which constitute the essence of God's worship), and there are certain things that are circa sacra - (incidental things about the worship of God). The former are determined wholly by God - "what is not commanded is forbidden." That is the biblical principle regulating God's worship. The latter are to be determined by the church in order for the act of worship to take place. These are the circumstances. They are also called the adiaphora; indicating that they are indifferent things which fall within the sphere of Christian liberty. They are things that, in Divine wisdom, God has left undecided in His word. This is wise, because the Church of Jesus Christ is called to worship God in all ages, countries, and cultures with their differing circumstances. Consequently, the circumstances around worship may, from time to time and place to place, differ quite significantly. [2] This is not wrong - it is to natural, and to be expected. Reason For Caution

Over the years many things have intruded into the worship of God under the guise of things indifferent. This is how altars, priestly vestments, incense, candles, crucifixes, crosses, musical instruments, choirs, dancers, drama troops, puppet shows, etc., etc., etc., entered the church. These innovations that so appeal to human senses wormed their way in the back door under the guise of "circumstances." Little by little they externalise the worship of God and rob the church of the pure worship in spirit and truth. Recognising this, we must be cautious. We must be able to discern an invalid circumstance when we see one. We must be equipped to tell what is a real and legitimate circumstance, and what is not. We must be prepared to do so in the awareness that many "new and innovative worship practices" are impatient to gain entry into our worship. Discerning the Valid from the Invalid

Our Westminster Confession makes the distinction between elements and circumstances very clearly in Chapter 1:6. Along the way it describes what is valid circumstances, thereby distinguishing them from their counterfeit: The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. [that covers the elements of worship, cjc] Nevertheless, we acknowledge that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed.

Â We can note three things here. First, valid circumstances have no sacred significance - they are things common to human actions and societies. That is one distinguishing feature. Valid circumstances of worship are not special "religious" or "sacred" things that the Church has and does - while the world doesn't. They are the same things that would need to

place for a kite-flying club to meet, sing, read, or listen to a speech. They are things the Church does as a society of human beings. A valid circumstance of God's worship has no sacred significance.

Second, valid circumstances are things which must be ordered by the Church if the Divinely ordained worship is to proceed. In the words of the Belgic Confession, article 32, the rulers of the church are "to institute and establish such ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the church..." Church power is lawfully exercised in establishing ordinances concerning valid circumstances that have no sacred significance. Conversely, it would be an unlawful exercise of Church power to establish something that was not a valid circumstance.

Thirdly, even when it has been established that the thing is indeed a valid circumstance that must be ordered, care is required. The way things are ordered will either help or hinder the church in its worship of God. The Church is not left to her own devices, but is to be "guided by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed." All things must be ordered according to the great guiding principles of God's word, unto edification, decently and in order.

When the church lawfully exercises this power it is not enacting rituals, nor is it investing any thing or action with sacred significance. It is simply ordering the practical matters that must be put in place for worship to proceed in a God honouring and edifying manner. Guiding Principles

Rising from the Biblical regulative principle of worship there are several principles which set valid circumstances apart from the invalid.

#1 It must be an incidental circumstance required by the act of worship.

A genuine circumstance which may and ought to be ordered by the church is required by the act of worship required by God. God gives the worship, and the worship has its accidents. These circumstances are created, and required, by the act of worship. This element of necessity helps us distinguish a genuine circumstance from its counterfeit. A valid circumstance is demanded by the act of worship. The invalid originates with man and is superimposed on the worship. When worship can proceed unhindered without the thing, it is likely something fabricated by man - to establish such a thing as a circumstance of our worship would be an unwarranted innovation. It is something concocted by man, not called for by God. It will be like a thistle barb in the Church's toe - a cause of aggravation and offence.

#2 The thing must have no religious or sacred significance in itself.

This is clear enough. God alone has the right to determine how he will be worshiped. God alone is able to set any action apart to a sacred or religious use, or to attribute to any object a sacred significance. This power ordains the elements of the two sacraments; giving to the objects and actions their sacred significance, making them holy signs and seals to faith. The Church has no such authority or power to do this. Just as soon as the church usurps this Divine prerogative it enters the realm of superstition, with its many "books to the laity." If God has not set something apart to an holy and sacred use only superstition can. For the Church to do this would not be to order the circumstances but to ordain worship.

A valid circumstance has no religious or sacred significance. If something does have sacred or religious significance, then it partakes of the essence of worship. It is therefore not a valid circumstance. We may not give it a place alongside God's worship.

#3 It must be a thing to do with God's appointed worship, but that has not been determined for us by Scripture.

Obviously, if God has ordered the circumstances around an element of worship that ordinance is not open to contradiction. We must humbly, and thankfully worship God by receiving that ordinance as something our God has ordered for us. For instance, God has ordained one day in seven to be set aside for his worship, the Lord's day - therefore, we are not at liberty to institute man-made holy days alongside God's command. God has given us the inspired book of praise in the Psalms, we are not then at liberty to invent and ordain others. God has given us a visible sign and seal of Christ's atoning death in the Lord's Supper, we are not now at liberty to invent and add others, etc..

Only those things left undetermined by God can be valid circumstances.

#4 It must be something for which the church is able to give sufficient reason and warrant to those of tender conscience.

This point establishes the need for the church to be able to demonstrate to its members that a thing is a valid circumstance of worship - before it is introduced. This test prevents the Church from foisting rights, ceremonies and religious symbols upon the people of God, thus binding and violating the conscience where God's Word does not. It maintains the gloriously liberating principle that the conscience of the believer is bound by the Word of God alone.

Therefore, we reject all human inventions, and all laws, which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever. Therefore we admit only that which tends to nourish and preserve concord, and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God.[3]

When a Church judges carefully between valid and invalid circumstance - the regulative principle has an application. Invalid circumstances, notwithstanding their false claim to be things indifferent, and the clamour of earthly minded members for their introduction, will be recognised as human inventions and rejected.

That church will be equipped to maintain the simple, unadorned, spiritual worship of the New Testament Church restored by the Reformation. And in that worship it may look with good hope for the rich blessing of covenantal fellowship and communion with the living God through Jesus Christ.

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FOOTNOTES 1. Shorter Catechism #50-51

2. It is certainly not necessary that a people first be "westernised" before they can worship God. We may think (if we are not clear on the distinction between element and circumstance) that all variations in circumstances are differences in worship! We would be mistaken. When the elements of God's worship as required in Scripture are received entire and kept pure from elements intruded by men, there is true worship.

3. Belgic Confession, Article 32.

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